

Demonstrations greet Spanish government vote to send troops to Iraq

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The Spanish government approved the sending of 1,300 combat troops to Iraq at a cabinet meeting on Friday, July 11. The vote to send troops was a foregone conclusion, so much so that Prime Minister Aznar was in America at the time of the meeting.

The move to send troops to Iraq has provoked large demonstrations against further Spanish involvement in the region. The occupation of Iraq is seen by broad sections of the population as nothing more than naked colonial aggression.

Adapting to this popular opposition, the Socialist Party (PSOE) has attacked Aznar and his government for risking Spanish troops clashing with the Iraqi population. Its spokesman Jesus Caldera said Aznar “was risking soldiers’ lives to protect the interests of George W. Bush.” He went on to say that the Popular Party “would be held responsible for everything that happens alongside the occupying forces.”

The troops, mostly taken from the Foreign Legion, will join a 9,200-strong force made up of 12 countries and led by Poland. The force will operate in the south-central sector of Iraq. In the past, Aznar, one of America’s staunchest allies in the plunder of Iraq, sent 900 non-combatant troops on the basis they were there for humanitarian purposes. The current forces are combat-ready.

Much has been made of the fact that the deployment will include units trained in chemical warfare or biological weapons, although no such weapons have been found in Iraq. A contingent of the Spanish national police will form part of the group. The cabinet has approved the troops being deployed until December 30, but Defence Minister Federico Trillo has said that they could remain longer.

The Polish-led force will comprise three brigades commanded by Spain, Poland and Ukraine. Its focus

will be on security in the region between Basra and the capital Baghdad. The troops are due to arrive by the latter part of July and be fully operational by August 15.

The conservative Spanish government has been extremely nervous at the deployment of troops. Trillo has insisted that the area where the troops will be sent is “tranquil,” although he later added, “No international missions have been without risk.”

In the course of the war, Spain consistently registered the highest levels of opposition throughout Europe, with repeated opinion polls at more than 90 percent against the war. Seeking to use the United Nations as a cover for its part in a colonial operation, Trillo said that the sending of troops was in accord with UN Security Council resolution 1483, which calls upon UN member states to assist in the reconstruction of Iraq and help provide security.

The defence minister was recently booed by a group of relatives of soldiers returning from Iraq to the American-run base of Rota in Cadiz. He made them wait three days until he could fit a welcome ceremony into his agenda. Even then, he made the relatives wait four hours in the hot sun. Four fainted as a result. This discontent comes on top of growing anger from relatives of 62 soldiers killed in an air accident. The soldiers returning from Afghanistan were killed when their Russian-made plane crashed over Turkey. So far, the government has refused to accept responsibility and is not prepared to pay compensation.

The last time Spain sent as many troops abroad was in 1898. This was to take part in the Spanish-American war, which culminated in Cuba’s independence and a humiliating defeat for the Spanish at the hands of its present ally. The defeat by forces called the “Rough Riders,” led by future president Theodore Roosevelt,

signalled the end of Spain's position as a world power, leaving it with only a relatively small number of possessions, mainly in Africa.

The dispatch of troops abroad this time around could prove no less humiliating. As increasing numbers of American and British soldiers are brought home in body bags, Aznar must be watching nervously at the deepening crisis of his American and British counterparts.



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